

**A Saga**  
**of the**  
**Free Walsers**

by:

Christian Bühler

How the Allemann families and other  
relatives settled Switzerland.

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About the Author

**Christian Bühler.** "The History of the Free Walsers" was first published in German by the Walser Association of Graubünden in 1978. The author of this absorbing story, which captures the historic background of the Walser migrations so faithfully, is Christian Bühler. He was born in 1903 in the Walser village of Tschappina am Heinzenberg in Canton Graubünden. He worked as a teacher from 1923 to 1946 in Flerden am Heinzenberg. From 1946 on, he worked as a farmer and cattle breeder in the same village of Flerden. During the years 1935 to 1939 and 1955 to 1965 he served on the High Council in the Graubünden Parliament and from 1959 to 1967 he represented Canton Graubünden as National Councilor in the Swiss Federal Parliament in Bern.

Christian Bühler died in 1999 at the age of 96. His many works live

on, as a permanent reminder of this towering intellect.

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**The Route**-The party of young men and their families departed from The Goms region of the upper Rhône River valley (see Ulrichen, #1) and followed the Eginen-thal (valley) ever upward until they traversed the Gries Glacier and crossed over into Italy at the Nufenen Pass (#2). From there, they followed above the Gris Valley, generally coursing SE until they arrived on the south side of the Brunnihorn (8200 feet altitude) where they stopped (#3) to view their new home which lie before them in the valley below. This settlement they named "Kehrbächi" the bend in the river. It was to be their home for the next two generations. The year was 1230.

(see map on page 12)

Christian Bühler

Maiensaess

*Glossary*

A small log-cabin type barn without windows to store feed hay. Usually built on various levels of the alps. As the snow starts to drive them downward, the animals feed on that stored hay, one level at a time.

Landsgemeinde Their yearly election assembly was held outdoors, on a large square. The voting was by raising their right hand (men only) well into the 20th century.

Sturmglöcke Literally "storm bell" a high-pitched bell to alert people of dangers like floods, fire, etc. splinter of resinous pinewood. Propped up by primitive rodiron stand to hold firm, it was often dipped in pitch and used as torch to light up the home at night.

Wandern

Verb: to walk briskly, to hike. Not to be confused with Engl. to *aimlessly meander!* The Swiss have lots of *Wanderlieder* happy marching songs to help keep up the pace.

Kettenhemde Engl. *Mail* part of the armor. A *knitted* metal tunic knights wore in battle.

Hellebarde

Engl., *halibart*. A hand weapon.

Hof

Yard (farm yard), also court.

Foreword

Here it is, your ancestors' trials and triumphs.

I feel I have just been on their journey with them! It is a true privilege to have made their acquaintances and I stand in awe at their fortitude, their loyalty to each other, and their commitment to

firm principles; their embracing work as a way to better their lives and their gratitude to the Lord for their opportunities.

### The Setting

It is early spring and a beautiful day. On the south side of his sunburnt woodhouse, sitting on a small bench and surrounded by his grandchildren sits a rather old man.

Grampa had promised his grandchildren a very special story today and all the children's eyes are on him in great anticipation. He promised to tell them why we Tschappiner people speak a different and peculiar language, unlike the language all other Heinzenbergers speak.

Grampa begins his story: Many, many years ago - long before they settled in our then still uninhabited Tschappina - our forefathers made a very long journey. Today I want to tell you about these wandering people.

We call them The Free Walsers.

It is late at night in the little mountain village of Ulrichen, a dim light still flickers from a living room. An unsteady flame from a small torch (made of resinous pinewood splinters) dimly lights up the humble peasant home. In one corner stands a roughly hewn table with

no small farms or pieces of land to be found around here, whether to lease or to buy. How could one expect to find anything, what with the Gomservalley so overpopulated. I cannot remember a time when so many people ever lived in Ulrichen or neighboring villages."

"We'll just have to help him find a place of his own somewhere," sighs his wife.

"He surely cannot get married and still remain living here with us. Each little bedroom is occupied and there is not enough work on our land for so many men."

Peter, her husband, agrees: "That is why I have spent so many days wandering from place to place, searching for a homestead that would be suitable for Jakob."

They hear the door open and Jakob is finally home. The strong, tall young man with a head of blond hair has to stoop slightly to enter the living room. The room has a low ceiling, as is the custom in these small mountain homes.

"My, you've been gone a long time again, Jakob!" his mother calls out to him. "Were you looking around again for a little place of your own?"

the customary slanted legs. Enjoying the warmth of the oven bench is a man in his sixties, his hair slightly graying. He appears to have nodded off to sleep, his rhythmic breathing interrupting the stillness.

The light from the torch falls on his wife's hands who is working at her spinning wheel. She spins the wool from their sheep into yarn. This yarn she will later weave into the cloth from which she will fashion clothing.

for her husband and their six sons. The gentle whirring from the spinning wheel fills the little room with a loving sound.

Finally the woman sets the spinning wheel aside. has been a long day and the work is done.

Weary, she turns to her husband and says: "It is about time

that Jacob came home too! It certainly wouldn't hurt any."

Of course, that woke him up from his little nap. He walked over to the window and poked his head through the narrow opening, looking at the stars. "It certainly is late enough according to the stars it must be close to eleven o'clock. Jacob probably went searching for a little farm to lease. I doubt that he found anything. I myself have asked all over for the past few weeks, but there are

"No, Mother, not this time. I have given up on that idea." Jacob's answer surprised them. "A few friends and I discussed a different plan. Come, sit down and I'll tell you about it: "We all sat together in Josef's living room; Theodor, Leonhard, Franz and Johannes were all there. They're all in the same boat as I am. They each long to get married and create a home of their own, just as I do,

but find this impossible here in all of Gomservalley. So together we decided to look for a solution to our hope- less dilemma.

Nobody could see a way out.

Finally I spoke up with a plan an idea I've been carry- ing in my heart and mind for quite a while."

Up to now his father Peter and his mother had not breathed a single word. "Well? What kind of an idea could that be?" his mother finally asked. Father, who had re- mained on the oven bench up to now, scooted in a little. closer.

"Well, here it is," continues Jacob. "Everytime I ac- company the old muledrivers across the mountains into the Formazza valley where we pick up the tradegoods, I look around thinking what a beautiful homeland this would make.

No one at all lives in the upper part of the valley, no settlements yet.

Above it, the Alps rise up toward heaven. In the forest. I saw wonderful areas where lovely homes could be built. Here and there clear mountainwater springs out of the forest floor. I believe over there we would be free from the backbreaking labor of carrying water to our fields and homes."

Mother broke the heavy silence: "Jacob, surely you. could not think of leaving your parents, your siblings, and your homeland?"

"This is by far the hardest part in my decision," Jakob answers, fighting back his tears. "How I would love to remain in our cherished Gomservalley. What a joy it would be for me to work a small homestead alongside my sweet Maria, but I see no hope here. Oh, I love farm- ing and want to be a farmer alright. And since this is my desire, and also for the good and honor of my descen- dants, I have come to the decision to leave the land that has been my home up to now. For this reason I met with my friends tonight to let them in on my plan. Mother and Father, you should have seen how those young men hung

on my every word; they all had long given up their hopes. of staying farmers. Their eyes lit up and Theodor and Leonhard immediately agreed to risk it in joining me. Franz and Johannes still have misgivings."

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"So do I," the father finally spoke up. "Do you know who owns the unsettled Formazza Valley? and do you. really believe that you would get permission to clear that land and be allowed to settle there?"

With firmness and courage Jakob looked straight into his father's



eyes as he answered him: "Yes, Father, I do know that the valley belongs to Guido von Rodis. I feel certain that this Freeman will not object to our settling the valley, just the opposite. Peter, the old mule driver, told me not long ago that he met up with the Freeman Rodis on one of his trips across the mountains. They were just resting in the forest when Baron Rodis rode by. As he approached them, he looked around and then said to them: "This would be a great region for you Gomsers! You could build yourselves a beautiful homeland, with room to spare. Where you live now it is getting so crowded that pretty soon you may have to move your children into the stables with the cattle. I would allow you much greater freedom."...and that is what Peter, the old muledriver, told me."

"Well, what do you think, Father? I am sure the Free- man von Rodis will gladly give us permission to settle their valley. For one thing they will welcome people to whom they can leave this uninhabited region. It is to their own advantage and they will gladly profit from the rent of the land.

Up to now they had no income from it. Considering all this, the Freeman will surely not make high demands. and maybe even grant us more rights and freedoms than we have heretofore known in Gomservalley."

Father nodded thoughtfully and Jakob was sure he saw a twinkle in his eyes. He rejoices in this courageous young son and his fresh look toward a brighter future. Mother's throat was tight as she sits down next to Jakob, gently stroking his hands. "Could you really leave your old mother behind? Why don't you stay here with us. Some- where there must be a spot where you can settle maybe. farther down in the Rhone valley."

Jakob reaches for his Mother's hand and with the other gently strokes her gray hair. "Dear Mother, you must not be sad. You well know that one day we'll have to part. The lower Rhone valley is out of the question; the people living there have even less freedom to shape their lives than we do up here. What is the difference whether I live in the Gomservalley or over the mountain ridge? We will never ever forget you nor the rest of our loved ones. I promise to come and visit you at least once every year. "Tomorrow we must climb the ridge and meet with

the Freeman von Rodis. Theodor and Leonhard will go with me. It should not take us longer than three days. If all goes the way we hope, even this very spring all will-

Young men and I will hike over to the Formazza valley and start clearing the land for our homes."

Filled with new hope, Jakob now stretches his strong limbs and with a hearty "sleep well" he disappears into the loft.

His parents also turn in for the night and the house grows quiet. But sleep will not come easily to Mother. The image of her son Jakob leaving home keeps appearing to her aching soul over and over again. She stays awake for a long time, until her last prayer commends him into the protecting hand of his Father in Heaven. Then blessed sleep calms her heavy heart. It is the year 1230.

### **The New Homeland**

The evening falls and the last rays of sunshine barely touch the Formazza valley. From amid the massive rocks a long caravan wends its way slowly toward the valley floor. The pace is laborious and halting. The group is led by husky young men who are armed.

Right behind them follow muledrivers leading their heavily laden packmules. Their loads consist of a great variety of household goods from bundles of linens and clothing to carved wooden chests. In between the sideloads we see all sorts of tools. fastened down, topped by the spinning wheels of the women. The women and children walk behind, keeping. an eye on their worldly belongings. Forming the rear of the caravan are the cattle, sheep and goats, muuuuhing, bleating, and meckering. The job of the young boys is to drive the often hesitating little herd along. It is easy to see that both boys and animals are weary. It's been a long and hard road.

On a small terrace along the mountain the caravan comes to a halt. and once again man and beast enjoy a well-earned rest. Some of the cattle search for the juicy grasses along the rocky pathway, but most of them are too worn out to even bother to eat. They just drop on the ground wherever they happen to stand. The wandering.

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bring in much this first year though," Jakob answered.

"What will become of our cattle without enough hay for the winter?" his wife now wonders. But Jakob puts his arm around her shoulder and calmly says: "Don't you. worry about that, Maria! This summer we will drive the cattle up into the high Alps as we have done every year the same Alps that you have travelled across today.

In late summer the men will climb the steep. mountainside and harvest the wild hay. In autumn we may have to take some of our animals to the Italian market. Are you happy now with your husband, Maria?"

And how proud she is of Jakob and ever so grateful. After a short and well-deserved rest, the caravan moves on. Happy anticipation pushes the people forward. Their animals seem to sense the closeness of refreshing water and warm barn and quicken their pace. Before long the needs of each will be met and they will at last rest under

a secure roof. None too soon, as night already falls on the new settlement. Soon the little village is quiet. Only the voices and heavy footsteps of a few young men can be heard they volunteered to take over the first watch to protect the new little community.

It is the year 1230. emigrants themselves find a cool grassy spot to lie down and stretch out their weary limbs.

All, except one: It is Jakob Bandli, the young mountain peasant from Ulrichen. Much too excited to sleep, he walks over to the edge of the terrace. His eyes eagerly

search the deep valley. He says: "Can you see way down there in that clearing **in** the forest where those cozy little

homes stand and the granaries on their wooden legs in the rear? Just like in our Goms, and there, in between the houses that silvery spot.

That's the water fountain. That's where we will stop and no one will have to be

thirsty anymore. And look, the biggest house of them all right in the middle, that is the home I built for you, Maria!"

Giving way to his joy he threw his arms around her and their eyes sparkled with excitement and full of gratitude. "Our new homeland," Maria whispered, overcome. "What a beautiful welcome, Jakob, right there glowing in the last golden rays of

the evening sun. No chance for us to be homesick. But what will we call our new village?"

"We baptized it 'Kehrbaechi,' because right there the stream (Bach) goes into a bend. Look at the gentle incline toward the mountainside free of forest. It took a lot of sweat and honest labor for us to get this far, believe me. I'm sure the newly cleared meadows will not skirmishes. But we cannot complain since he pays promptly and is generous."

His companions all nod in agreement, "No, we can't complain!" Instinctively they quicken their pace and soon they reach the castle on the hill. All eyes are on the beautiful Langensee (lake).

Our mountain folks are mesmerized by the deep blue, shimmering surface of the lake. Water is the lifeblood for mountain people. From the tower nearby the sound of a horn calls their attention. The drawbridge falls and the castle gates are thrown wide open. With firm steps our brave Walliser soldiers now march across the wooden bridge, causing it to rattle and sway from its heavy chains.

The Lord of the manor meets them in the courtyard. The leader of our little troop of soldiers rides over toward him and reports his men. The Freeman thanks him for answering his call so promptly.

"A hearty welcome to all you men!" Simon turns to the soldiers now. "Take a seat at these wooden tables here in the courtyard." Soon the thirsty warriors drink from the heavy wine as they pass around the jug.

Even Simon of Locarno joins his mercenaries for a short while. In War

A small group moves through the Maggia Valley toward Locarno they are warriors, wearing coats of mail (maillots) that protect their bodies. Sweat runs from their foreheads as they handcarry their heavy iron helmets.

Two strong men walk behind the leader who rides on horseback. The two footsoldiers are the two oldest sons.

of Jakob Bandli the one who left his homeland in The Goms and settled his family in "Kehrbächi."

Like many others before them, these two young men became mercenaries. Growing up in a large family on their father's homestead in the Formazza Valley, they soon found that there was not enough work to create sufficient income for each. To make a life for themselves, the two brothers Peter and Jakob with other companions. from their village and valley now travel on foot over the mighty Guriner Furka Pass, through the Maggia Valley toward Locarno. Among them are old friends from The Goms, their former homeland.

Peter stops and pointing his hellebard, he exclaims: "I can already see Simon Orelli's fortress! That Simon sure is an undaunted warrior. Hardly a year goes by where he doesn't need us as soldiers for one of his

(Podestat) of Como. This is according to the will of the noble lords which I serve."

A long and bloody day comes to an end. Simon and his troops maintain a stronghold in a well-protected border of the city, but only with much difficulty. All through the day they fought off the continuously attacking warriors of Milan. The army of the enemy

had gotten wind of the intentions of the Locarneser and because of that arrived in Como at the same time. The surprise element was lost. Now to make matters worse, the enemy started ringing all the church bells of the city, as a sign of their victory. Simon is left with no other choice but to flee. His army is attacked brutally from three directions.

Toward the morning of Stephan's Day (on the 3rd of August in 1263) he retreats from the city with many of his soldiers, some of his own relatives among them. A few friendly Comasker (citizens of Como) help him flee to safety through a secret passageway in the citywall. Supported by other mercenaries, the Walsers protect him

in his retreat. All seemed to go well; Simon and his company had already reached the River Tresa when their enemy discovered their flight. They immediately start pursuing the fleeing Locarneser who are greatly hindered by the River Tresa. The Milanese soldiers easily won. He is in a jolly mood. Their arrival gives him great

confidence for what's in store for the coming day, as he has often made them part of his army before. None could equal them. None have been so fearless and loyal in stand-

ing by him in decisive moments of the battles. And as he now encourages them to drink and refresh themselves,

He begins to tell them how their fathers before them. helped him from victory to victory.

"Tomorrow, my young friends, you can prove to me whether you understand the military profession as well as your fathers did.

This time we are heading to Como.

Get a good night's rest, as we will start out before dawn breaks."  
And with these words the celebrated (famous) military leader took leave of his mercenaries.

A corps of soldiers approaches the city of Como at a rapid pace. It is Simon of Locarno and his army. His shield sparkles brightly in the sunlight and even his horse senses the seriousness of the moment. He can barely reign it in. Four sturdy young Walsers march ahead of Simon for protection and flanking his side is the leader of the Walsers, likewise on horseback. Simon now explains to him the reason for today's attack on Como: "Today Como has to fall into our hands and if we succeed, I shall without delay install Konrad von Venosta as overseer

take them and promptly take Simon of Locarno, his cousin and others prisoner.

The news of their capture reaches the still fighting Walsers and their leader calls for immediate retreat. No one hinders them on their way home. The little group of defeated soldiers looks somber and no one speaks. Jakob

Bandli feels a choking in his throat and once in a while a tear glistens in his eyelashes. His brother Peter was killed in battle in the streets of Como. In his mind's eye he already sees his Mother sobbing and his Father lamenting over the loss of their beloved son.

He is suddenly jolted out of his thoughts by the sound of rapidly approaching horses. Is it the enemy? The Walsers quickly take up defensive positions. After a few tense moments that



seemed more like an eternity, the rapidly approaching rider brings his horse to a screeching (sudden) stop inches from the outstretched weapons of our soldiers, pelting their faces sharply with sand. The rider is not alone, but accompanied by a few others. Now they recognize the leader. He is the Freeman Albert von Sax. He leans forward toward the neck of his horse and says: "You seem in an awful hurry to get back home. For a while I thought I would never catch up with you! I have a plan for you mountain people. Simon von Locarno

is held prisoner and for the time being will not need any mercenaries. You, on the other hand, need an income. As I heard from one of your Walsers, your homeland in the Formazza Valley is already heavily populated. I know where there is plenty of work for hardworking farmers and soldiers like you Walsers."

"And where would that be?" asked a few from the group of warriors.

"In the northern region of my homeland, the Misox, where the mighty St. Bernardin Pass leads over to an alpine valley. We call it Rheinwald. The land farthest back in this beautiful valley belongs to me. Nobody lives there permanently. Only the alps are used in their season. Baron von Vaz, a Freeman like myself, rules over the outer areas of Rheinwald. His region is settled by Romansh people.

Here is my problem if I don't settle and make use of my land back in that valley, I stand in danger of losing it to Walter von Vaz. The way I see it, you Walsers would be just the right kind of farmers to build yourselves a new homeland

there.

I would gladly let you make good use of those alps for a very reasonable tribute. For additional income you could take over the mule drives for trade across the St. Bernardin Pass. That would provide many days' worth of pay. What do you say to all this?" Albert von Sax sits upright on his horse to watch their reaction to his offer.

"You gave us a great deal to think about!" answers Jakob Bandli. The leader of the Walsers now speaks up: "Before we could make such an important decision, we would first like to look at the area that you are talking about, if you please, sir!"

"Agreed!" exclaims Albert von Sax. It would be best. if yet today you would choose a few of your men who could come and look at (survey) the valley. They can just follow me and we will put them up at the castle for the night."

At this the Walsers huddle together to counsel one with the other. Soon they have picked three of their ranks to accompany Freeman von Sax. Among them is Jakob Bandli. It is the year 1263.

### **Hard Days**

The Formazza Valley sits in half darkness, even though the day is not over by a long shot. Lightning. strikes without letting up and the ominous sound of thunder fills the air.

The mountain stream rises higher and higher as it rushes toward the valley carrying with it mud and rubble. Here and there it threatens to leave its banks and run across the valley floor. From the church steeple in Kehrbaechi you can hear the stormbell ring out its warn- ing. Men from all directions are running toward the rag- ing river. You'll see Jakob there with his brothers. Even their father, supporting himself with two sticks, joins. them. He listens to

his son calling out directions, "Bring logs and rocks to both sides of the river to build a dyke." Already the river bed is filled with mud and rubble. Here and there a mere boy or a youth rolls a rock toward the bank. Men and their trusty mules haul what they can to help. Others stand kneedeep in the angry river to build protection for the embankment. The waters roll darker and darker, and the dull sound of the pounding rocks increases; the water keeps rising despite their great efforts. A boy yells, "Up here the dam is breaking!" "Here too!" calls out another. Many run to help, but like a dark dragon the river now slithers across the precious and beautiful meadows their fathers had cleared and planted with unspeakable efforts and backbreaking pains. Jakob also reached the upper break in the dam and stepped into deep water, trying to quickly fill in the gap. But their efforts are in vain. No sooner have they reinforced the wall, the angry river rips it down again.

"Don't bother anymore it is all for naught," Jakob calls to all who tried so hard to save their land.

The farmers stand in silence as they watch their crops, in full bloom washed away. Many of their precious little fields disappear before their eyes under the grey mass of rubble and boulders.

Lamenting, the women ask: "With what will we bake bread for our families this year, now that the grain fields have been ruined? Who will have a sack of grain to sell us?"

A little peasant complains: "How will we feed our cattle this winter?"

"There is nothing we can do, except to drive most of our animals south to the market," answers Jakob ruefully.

"And then, what will become of us next year without cattle? We won't

have any milk, cheese, or meat!" anx-  
iously asks Theodor, his neighbor."

Now, now let us not lose courage! Despair is not part  
of our Walser nature!" Jakob now reminds them impa-  
tiently. "I guess we cannot put off our leaving this valley.  
any longer. Even without these floods and the famine,  
we would eventually have to move to where there is  
enough land for all of us."

Having lost the fight against the raging waters, each  
family now turns toward their home to find shelter and  
refuge from the still-raging storm. But in their hearts  
they firmly resolve that, as soon as the weather  
clears up, they will start to clear their fields and  
salvage whatever they possibly can.

### **The Departure (Exodus)**

The sharp pinnacles of the Misox Mountains are  
bathed in golden sunlight of the early June morning.  
The air is crystal clear and **in** stark contrast  
against the deep blue sky stands out the mighty  
Saxon Fortress. Just now the heavy drawbridge is  
lowered and Albert von Sax's knights march  
across. They wear their helmets and carry their  
lances, but are not wearing their cumbersome  
coats of mail on this day.

Following them are two men on horseback.

The one on the right carries the shield with the  
coats. of arms of the Saxer. He is the Freeman  
Albert von Sax. The rider on his left with a very  
serious countenance is the leader of the  
Walsers. He now looks back over his shoulder,  
encouraging the long row of wagons to follow.  
One after another they rattle and groan across  
the draw- bridge. The wooden carts are  
roughly hewn and their wheels not entirely  
round. The wagons are heaped high with  
household goods, foods, and an

occasional woman. and child gets to ride, according to need. Most of them are horsedrawn, but here and there an occasional oxen does the heavy pulling.

On the next morning, the men lead and coax the horses. and oxen along or walk beside their loaded wagons. With

a content look on their faces, the emigrants walk firmly **into** the beautiful morning. After the hardships and dangers of many days of travel they were kindly welcomed at the castle. They were well fed and enjoyed the first. undisturbed night's rest in many days. Today they hope to reach their new homeland, the Rheinwald. Along the way they realize they have company; approaching them from the nearby meadow are a few young men and boys.

They are driving a small herd unto their path - cows, calves, sheep and goats, all mingling happily together. Jakob looks back over the small caravan entrusted to him. Today he is not worried; confident that the vigilant. knights of Freeman von Sax will protect them.

It is the year 1272/1273. **In** the Waldgebirge (High **Forest**)

It had been a very mild night. On a flat area near the young, bubbling Rhine the wagons of the Walser's who arrived are parked in a quadrangle. Two men keeping guard, pace around them. There is noise and movement in one or the other wagon. It is the men who have spent the night here. Jakob Bandli who, just before their departure, was elected as the bailiff, is among them. They start building a fire in the hopes that the women would soon come and

prepare breakfast for all. But they are nowhere to be seen yet. Soon

they hear bright voices coming from the forest and through the slim larch trees and mountain spruce appear the women and children of the Walsers, accompanied by a few men. A small boy runs ahead of them, right into the arms of bailiff Jakob, who lifts his son into his arms. and asks: "How did you sleep in your new homeland?" "Quite well," his now approaching wife answers. "Freeman von Sax's men led us to a fine camping place the little alpine huts that are used by the Misoxer cowherders during summer. The knights told us the alps and huts belong to the Freeman von Sax. We had a wonderful rest."

After everyone enjoyed a good breakfast, the men set to work.

The women and small children, along with a guard, stay with the wagons. They would not want to stay by themselves, as bears roam these woods and often attack. The men all follow Jakob, their overseer. There is so much work ahead. First they look over the land to find the most suitable place to build their new homes and barns.

Jakob, who had walked ahead of them, now stands still and calls back to his people: "This looks like a beautiful spot, right here!"

They have soon caught up with him. "You see, here we stand on higher ground. Looking toward midday, you can see that slope that will protect our future home from the Rhine River that flows below us. The river looks very harmless and peaceful today. But if you look farther down, those widespread deposits of grey mud and rubble that cover a large part of the valley along the riverbank tell us that it has not always been this tame. None of us would wish to fight another flood like we did in the Formazza Valley."

Others agree with his choice of building sites. "This is truly a good spot for our homes," says Peter from Simpeln. "and a few hundred

paces from here I notice a strong. spring flowing out of the ground."

"Yes, and besides that a lovely creek runs right along- side here which will certainly serve us in many ways," adds Heinrich from Fruttwald.

It didn't take long for all to agree that this was a good place to begin their settlement. They continue to look. over the area.

"We need to find us a suitable piece of land we can still clear this year and turn into a meadow," Jakob reminds them. They find it and, taking a good half hour, the farmers walk off a quadrangle of land. At each of the four corners a tree trunk is notched as a marker. Old farmer Walter, who carried his hoe along with him, digs into the soil here and there, and examines it. He rubs it, smells it, and even tastes it. Some of the others gather around to watch him and mostly nod approvingly it will do just fine.

"This Rheinwalder soil is good we should soon be able to produce a fine harvest," is the old man's verdict.

Satisfied and full of confidence the men return to their camp. They share what they found out and plan to do with the patiently waiting women, who look relieved and happy.

The men are anxious to start with the felling of trees that same afternoon.

With so much work to do, the days go by rapidly. It is hard to recognize the area. It looks like a battlefield. The fallen trees lie sideways and crosswise. Above is a group of men who are cutting down the trees. Others farther down are chopping the limbs off the slender logs. Some of the men and older boys lead the sturdy horses and, tying the logs to ropes, they drag them to the building

site. It too is buzzing with activity. Headed by the dark-haired Lanfranco from the Maggia Valley, a few young men are digging the foundations for the various homes to be raised. Even the women and children have their work assignment; their job is to locate the natural clay found along the river banks. They painstakingly dig out the stubborn chunks and carry them to the building site.

The midday meal never tasted so good. Especially today, because yesterday the brave hunter Juli from Brig. killed his first Rheinwalder alpine goat (ibex) and the fresh meat is enjoyed by everyone sitting around the table. After lunch, bailiff Jakob has an important announcement to make to his people. He speaks loud so that everyone can hear him: "On my journey over the St. Bernardin Pass I was able to discuss many things with Albert von Sax. He is willing to bestow upon us as an inheritable fief the region that we are now clearing and settling, and that for a very reasonable quitrent."

"But what about the alps that we so desperately need for the feeding of our cattle over summer?" one of the men wonders. "I also mentioned that to the Freeman," answers Jakob.

"As farmers with feudal tenure, we receive from him and the Church in Misox the Talalp Cadrigola (today) called Cadriola) and the Zapport Alp, a fief to be inherited by our descendents. As yearly quitrent, the owners

request 39 pounds, 6 schillings, and 8 pfennige. What do you say to this, my friends? Are you willing to lease the alps under these conditions?"

Peter Fruttwald, one of the older Walsers, speaks up: "I am for leasing those alps for the quitrent mentioned. With-



out the alps there is no way we can make ends meet here in this harsh valley. The sparse acreage will not allow much farming, and we will need to dedicate our efforts to raising cattle, something we are used to doing. Even then, **in** order

to support our families adequately, we can only manage if we can take the animals up to the alps during the short summer months. I vote to accept the offer of the fief."

Others wish to speak. All speak in favor of the lease, as they are pleased with the beautiful Rheinwalder Alps. Bailiff Jakob calls for a vote. The vote is unanimous and it is decided to lease the aforementioned alps.

Jakob Bandli declares the first Walser meeting in their new homeland closed, and everyone returns to their work.

It is the year 1272/1273. The Schirmbrief (Letter of Protection?)

Autumn winds are tearing through the Rheinwald. Soon winter will begin. German-speaking people have not been idle during the last few years. They have made themselves quite comfortable in their new valley and most of them live in their own homes by now. They are scattered far and wide, and the rather small but cozy wooden log houses look friendly and welcoming toward the young Rhein River. The logs of the house walls are already turning dark brown from the hot summer sun and stand out in stark contrast against the whiteness of the cellar walls. A group of men and boys are standing in front of the bailiff's home. How is it that they are not at work today?

A few of the bigger boys are now running toward the village square, shouting, "He's coming, he's coming! I just saw the Freeman's

white horse through the trees!"

The men nod. "He ought to be here directly."

"Yes, you're right-I can already hear the horses' hoofs. beat," adds Joder.

He had no sooner said that, when four horsemen appeared from the woods and galloped toward them. They must have been riding hard, as the horses pant heavily and snort, their nostrils wide open. As if on command, they all come to a sudden stop right in front of the waiting Walser farmers. The men and boys rise to their feet, and one or the other stiffly reaches for his hat.

With youthful vigor the older gentleman with the eagle eyes jumps off his horse. It is the Freeman Walter von Vaz. Right away one of his knights hurries over to hold the reigns of his master's horse.

Walter now turns toward the Walsers, "And, how do you like living here in your new homeland?"

"It truly is beautiful, but the climate is harsh," a few now answer him.

Jakob, the mayor, walks toward the Freeman. He bids him a friendly welcome, and then he suddenly remembers that he has seen this gentleman once before. It was in the wars they fought for Simon of Locarno.

"May I invite the gentlemen to come into our living room!

There we can talk freely," beckons the mayor invitingly.

Soon they are seated at the roughly hewn pine table in Jakob's living room. Seated at the end of the table is the baron's scribe.

A piece of parchment is spread out in front of him. While sharpening the point of his goose quill, he waits for directions from his master. Jakob Bandli and two of the oldest and most experienced

Walsers sit on one side

of the table. facing Walter von Vaz who takes up the opposite side.

The Freeman starts to speak: "You Walsers, I watched. you and got to know about you already during the Italian. wars we fought together. Even then I thought to myself that I would like to have you hardworking people for my friends.

"I entertained the thought of inviting you Walsers to settle down in my Raetian homeland, but Freeman Albert von Sax got ahead of me.

"Now lately rumors have been brought to my ears that you are not entirely satisfied with the protection that the Saxers offer you; that he doesn't show much consideration for you. I can see how that could happen, since he lives so far away from you. No matter how strong his fortress, it is of no use to you in case of an attack.

"You would really be much better off under my protection. In just a very few hours you can reach my fortress in Spluegen and find secure refuge there." The Freeman now pauses and studies the faces of the Walsers. They sit in stunned silence and reflect on Walter's words. Finally Jakob the mayor speaks up: "Yes, we are concerned about our situation, but for us this is not a simple problem. We have a protection agreement with the Free-

man von Sax. I am concerned that if we now make an agreement with you, Albert von Sax will become our enemy. He then has reason to accuse us of breaking our promise to him. It is not in our nature to break our word. Besides that, through him and the Church of Misox we own a few alps as hereditary fief. If we now join your camp, noble Lord, Albert might cause us problems over our alps

that we so need desperately."

Walter von Vax nervously bites his lips and says: "What exactly are the terms of the protection contract you have with Baron von Sax?"

"We promised him under oath that we would never go to war against him and his heirs; yes, we even promised. to come to his aid and protect him in case of danger," answers the mayor.

The Freeman seems relieved. "Well, if that is your only concern you have nothing to worry about. You can in good conscience make an agreement with me. You will not need protection from Freeman von Sax anymore. And in our protection contract we will state that you Walsers will never have to serve me in fighting against Freeman von Sax-Misox on the other side of Vogelberg or his heirs." Up to then the faces of the three Walsers looked very worried, but now they broke into smiles. "Under these conditions we can continue our discussion!" answers a relieved Jakob. "What is the nature of the protection contract you are willing to make with us, Freeman von Vaz?" "This is readily told. I will accept you men along with your families under my protection. This means, should you at any time be harmed in body or your possessions. be damaged, without provocation even by the Saxers I will come to your aid. Yes, I will even make amends for damage done to you. In return I should be permitted to expect that you will fight at my side in feuds and wars. this side of the St. Bernardin."

"This we will certainly pledge, under one condition," interrupts the bailiff.

"And what would that condition be?" Walter von Vaz wishes to know.

"That we get fully recompensed for all the help we will be required to give you, sir! The armaments and meals away from home cost considerable money, and besides we cannot afford to let the work lay idle here at home and serve in your army without pay."

"I guess I didn't make myself clear in this regard," interrupts the Freeman. "For all service you render in my

military expeditions, you and your men shall be fully compensated. Agreed?"

"Yes, we will agree then. Yet there is one more request we need to add. You know that it is in the tradition of us Walsers to freely elect our own mayor from within our ranks; and to settle our own arguments among ourselves; also to hold court ourselves. We were allowed to do that already in the Formazza Valley. We request to be given the same rights here. Moreover we wish for the Freeman to acknowledge all our laws and rules that we have brought with us from the old homeland." With this Jakob solemnly sits down.

Deep furrows have dug into von Vaz' forehead after listening to these words. Looking at the three serious faces of our Walsers, he thinks to himself: These men speak as if they sat across from their equal; these self-confident, proud Walliser farmers!

Then he answers rather sharply: "Now you have asked for too much. I know of no other people in this whole land who is allowed to be their own judge in all cases. I will make a proposal to you Walsers: You may, according to your traditions, have the prerogative to choose your own mayor and to hold court over your own disputes and minor trespasses. However, should grand theft or

even murder occur in your valley, in those cases I shall be the judge. And from this, my right, I will not budge." "Great, we are in agreement, then!" Jakob assures him. Freeman von Vaz continues: "We still need to determine the sum that you Walsers must pay me for the protection I committed myself to give you. You will owe 20 pounds (milaneser pounds) yearly, and to be paid regularly on Martinstag (St. Martin's Day = 11 November)."

Now the Walsers would like to lower that sum a bit, but they are out of luck for today. The Freeman stays firm in his demand. Walter von Vaz turns to his scribe and asks: "Are you sure you have written down every point, exactly as we have agreed upon?"

"Yes, my lord, this I have done," the scribe assures him.

Walter starts to rise, when Jakob says: "There is just one more sentence I wish to add to our agreement. The time may come when we wish to amend and improve our laws and conditions. We ask you humbly to allow us that privilege at any time."

"If it will make you happy, go ahead!" Walter sighs, worn out from all these discussions. "All points that we have agreed to here and today shall be written down and my seal put to it. Then I shall hand over to you your Letter of Protection, of which you may truly be proud!" Standing tall and straight, Mayor Jakob looks his com-

panions in the eyes and answers: "Yes, and as soon as we have the contract, we shall truly have the right to call ourselves Free Walsers."

With a hearty handshake the two men now seal their mutual agreement and end the meaningful council. It is the year 1277.

**In the Ring**

It is Sunday and the month of May has come to the valley. Two men on horseback are seen riding toward the valley. They are the Rheinwalders, Jakob Bandli, whose hair has turned grey, his youngest son, now fully grown. They are not alone. Nearly all the inhabitants of his village are following them. It is Landsgemeinde day, the yearly assembly of all voters of the Canton.

"What wonders springtime always brings," exclaims. Peter, the mayor's young son. "Just a few weeks ago we were still buried deep in winter snow. But today thou- sands upon thousands of little snowbells (first spring. flower high up in the alps) are ringing in spring." Peter seems unusually happy and excited today.

His father agrees: "Yes indeed, May is beautiful here in the Rheinwald. And especially for us free men who have the privilege to ride to the Landsgemeinde. Are you excited to step into the ring of the free men for the first time and to help elect the Landammann (cantonal presi- dent) and the judge?"

Peter can hardly contain himself, "I am so happy to- day! Already when I was a little boy there was noth- ing I wanted more than to be grown up enough to be able to vote."

missed. Most of the Nufeners left their old homeland. in Hinterrhein years ago and settled here. So they are not strangers, but friends and family.

The Walsers are forming a festive procession and together start walking toward the Landsgemeindeplatz the village square where the annual elections are held, as has been their custom for many generations. Two pipers in festive garb lead the parade merrily playing a march. Between them walks the bailiff

(court usher), looking very solemn in his long coat. High on horseback follows the Landammann (cantonal president). of the Walsers, Claus Shaenni. He likewise is decked out in festive clothing. His jacket is excellently fitted and so are the short knee-high pants. The judges, riding two by two, are next, following the Landammann. They too are dressed up for the occasion. The villagers, with the men riding ahead of them, make up the rest of the procession. It is all very dignified.

The parade stops and the Landammann and judges hand their horses over to the servants. The peasants tie theirs to the trees. The women and children settle themselves down in the blooming meadow, while the men gather in groups and visit with friends and neighbors. Jakob looks proud at his son and says: "That is good; we need young men like you in Rheinwald."

They had been riding through dense forest, which is now thinning out and getting lighter. Beyond, the homes of the new settlement of Nufenen appear.

"A great deal of work these people have accomplished.

I remember when this area was nothing but a large catch- all for washed-up sediment and rubble, overgrown with wild brush. Now look at it, today rich and beautiful mead-

ows wherever you turn," Jakob explained to his son, looking very pleased.

"Look, Father, how far apart the houses stand!" the

boy wonders. "The Nufeners had much more land **at** their disposal than we did in Hinterrhein," his father adds.

As they enjoy talking to each other, they ride past the first few



homes of the village. It seems like all the citizens of Nufenen have already gathered in the square. The men and women from the two villages greet each other with strong handshakes, as is their custom. Their greetings are hearty, as they are truly happy to be reunited with family and old friends they have not seen in a long while. They savor a few hours. with father or mother, a sister or brother they have

Hans Mengelt from Hinterrhein met his old friend Joeri Trepp from Nufenen. He says: "It has been a long time. since we last saw each other, Joeri. Last autumn I looked for you in vain among the fellows we met from Nufenen. We met up with them while we were driving cattle over the St. Bernardin to market in Varese."

"I'm sure you did," answers Joeri. "Unfortunately I could not make it to market last autumn. I had bad luck with my cattle. Three of my good cows fell to their death off the Butzalp. Blinded by a heavy hailstorm they ran off the rocky precipice. Oh, look, the Landammann and the judges are going up to the platform now! The deliberations will be starting soon."

The bailiff gives a sign and a hush comes over the gathering. They try to move closer to the center. The free Walsers form a ring in the center.

Peter, the Hinterrheiner Mayor's son, stands proudly in between the men. He carefully observes all that is taking place and lets nothing escape. How proudly he watches his father sitting among the four judges. Now he sees the Cantonal President step a few paces forward and start to speak: "We bid a hearty welcome to all you men, women and children! Once more we have gathered here to counsel and to vote for the good of our valley. I

am well pleased that our Walser people continually grows. Already we have to choose a new public meeting place to hold our yearly elections. The distance from Medels. and Spluegen to Nufenen is much too great for those. who live there. It is important that all take part at these annual assemblies. It is particularly necessary today that each of you take part in these proceedings and that none stand idly by.

"Our steadfast protector, Donat von Vaz, has no sons. and therefore his territories and rights will someday fall into strangers" hands. We do not know those foreign lords. They may be friends, but likewise may be foes to our people. It behooves us therefore to arm ourselves and pull together while there is still time.

"With this in mind I encourage you to vote for a new place of assembly today. Then there is another matter we need to bring before you; this concerns our forests. Once upon a time our valley was rich in forest land, but the same is not true anymore today. We have overharvested. our forests, and we cannot afford to continue this prac- tice. We have no other choice but to declare and set aside individual pieces of our forests as protected pre- serves. If we do not take this precaution, we endan- ger our settlements.

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"Finally I bring before you a request (wish) from our lord protector. Freeman Donat von Vaz desires that we, the Walsers, keep the road over the Vogelberg and espe- cially over the Spluegen Pass in good repair. A reliable road will encourage more merchants to have their wares transported over these mountain passes. And when this. happens, we also will earn more wages.

"But first, let us turn to the necessary elections!"

With these words, President Schaenni steps aside. The first one of the judges steps forward. With a loud voice he announces: "First we will elect the Cantonal President. I propose that we reelect President Schaenni. However, according to Walser tradition, each of you can make your own proposal."

A hush goes over the assembly, but no one speaks **up**. "Since there are no other candidates proposed, let us vote. Those who wish to reelect our present Cantonal President Claus Schaenni for another term, will you please signify so by raising your right hand!" The arms of the Walsers are raised in support; they feel he has represented their people well. The judge announces that Claus Schaenni is reelected as their Cantonal President almost unanimously.

President Schaenni once more steps before his people.

With a pleased smile on his face he thanks his electors for their confidence in him.

Follows the election of the judges. Mayor and Judge Jakob Bandli declines to be reelected as a candidate. He wishes to let a younger and stronger man take over this post. According to Walser law, the new judge must be from Hinterrhein also. One candidate is proposed, but first the other judges are all reelected. And now they move on to elect a new judge. The name of the candidate proposed is Johannes Hoessli. In spite of his youth, he wins. the confidence of the voters.

The Eby halfway between the towns of Nufenen and. Medel is assigned as the new place of assembly for the yearly election meetings. A few suitable pieces of forest. are set apart as preserves. With this accomplished, the Cantonal President calls

this year's assembly closed: "Is there anything else that needs to be discussed?"

It is the year 1316. Foreign Intruders

It is late summer and a young and strong romansh boy walks across the lonesome Safien Valley. He has beautiful dark eyes and hair. He came from the Falaetscha Alp where he herds the alpine cattle. He has to fetch food. supplies from the outer Safien Valley just once more this summer before he brings the cattle back down. He seems in a hurry to get home, since he has so much news to bring to his parents.

Finally he arrives at his father's house. He hardly takes. time to greet his family and starts right out with his tale: "Think of it, our back country in Safien Valley is not so quiet and lonesome anymore. There are strangers there. The first ones already appeared at the beginning of summer. There were just men. They came down off the Alp Piaenetsch; the alp that the people from Spluegen use for summering their cattle. I kept watching them, because I wondered what those men were doing here in the valley. They carried heavy axes on their shoulders and had a few horses with them. And then they stopped right below our alps. They seemed to be examining the ground. as they went along. They also looked for water. I quietly moved closer to where they were and tried to listen to what they were saying to each other. But think of it, Father. I could not understand a word. These people talk. very differently from us. Finally they stopped at a very nice spot. It seemed like they had found what they were. looking for. The men immediately pounded four posts. into the ground. They then started walking out of the valley, but stopped again shortly. Here they repeated their previous task by again pounding four posts

into the ground; and they did this a few more times. And then. they just disappeared into the forest, taking their horses with them. After a while I started hearing axes chopping. wood and then big trees crashing to the ground. Their thundering echo coming back from the mountains scared me half to death.

"It was toward midday when even more workers showed up. They were all so busy. Some were digging. foundations, others were cutting the limbs off the freshly fallen trees. Again others hauled logs.

"And now they have already built walls and the wooden sides. Soon the houses will be ready. I think that these strangers have decided to live here."

The boy's father had been listening to every word and now says: "These intruders better not dare use our alps. And if they insist, I will go straight to the Abbess of the Convent of Cazis who leases us this alp. Boy, you keep a

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sharp eye on these strangers and what they are up to. As soon as I can, I will come up and have a look for myself. Then we will see if we cannot talk to these people."

About three weeks later the romansh man walks. toward the valley. He wants to bring his cattle home. At the same time he wants to see if what his son told. him is really so. Before long he sees the newly built homesteads.

His son meets him. They start examining the homes. up close. None of the strangers are around. "All the men moved away a

few days ago," tells the boy. "I think they went over the ridge southward."

"Look, Father, what is that moving along the mountain path, way back there toward the valley?"

"It looks a lot like men with loaded mules. Surely those are the strangers, and they with their wives and children are coming into our valley. Boy, we will watch them very closely today," said the father.

The caravan finally reach the valley floor and the farm-yard.

The two observing Romaners open their eyes wide in astonishment. They seem trim young men with blond, rugged beards. Their blue eyes examine their spectators critically. They greet father and son in the German language.

"Look at the strange clothing they wear, Father!" ex-claims the boy, astonished at the heavy grey woolen cloth the intruders' clothes are made of. Their legs are wrapped in leggings made of the same cloth and looking like high boots.

The pack mules are heavily loaded with their household goods. These strangers must really be serious about moving to a new homeland. Among them is a slightly grey-haired man. He is none other than Peter, the youngest son of Rheinwaldens' mayor. Along with his whole family, he too said goodbye to Rheinwald which had become too narrow to allow room for all the growing families. Peter would have enjoyed seeing his two sons become pack-mule drivers or mercenaries. It is hard for him to understand this young generation who takes no pleasure nor interest in the military profession. Especially his sons, who would rather migrate to this quiet and remote valley and scratch

out a living as mountain farmers.

The wagon train has come to a halt and all heads of families step forward. They will now move into their homesteads. Each family was assigned theirs in advance. Their newly elected Mayor Lorenz Tester reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a folded piece of parchment. We do not have the actual lease documents yet, however. The Abbess of Cazis is pleased that we turn some of her alps into meadowland and clear-cut the forest in a few places. She allows us the farmsteads as inheritable lease-right. She will write up the contracts at a suitable time later."

Gieri shakes his head in confusion, and he and his son bid a sad farewell to the alp. Once more the father looks back and says to his boy: "Who knows whether our animals have spent their last summer up here. These German-speaking intruders may have promised higher interest to the Convent than I can come up with. These Walsers will profit more from these alps as they live closer to them. Preferring higher return, the Abbess may cancel the lease with me." Lost in thought and depressed, he and his son turn homeward.

It is the year 1350.

ment. In a loud voice he reads the names and their assigned new home:

"Hans Gredig and Peter Bandli will move unto the Gurtinaetsch Hof (farmyard); Johannes Bandli and Peter Buchli will get the Wider's Hof; Josua Zinsli and

Lorenz Tester to the Hof zum Turm; Jakob Tschoeri goes to Maloenia; and Michel Buchli takes the Hof zum Bach." As the farms are at a distance from each other, the families wave goodbye, wishing each other goodspeed, and start out toward their new homesteads. The Romaner Gieri and his son follow the rest of the wagon train to-

ward the valley. Near the Turm (tower) they meet up with the mayor and Gieri walks toward him.

Speaking in his romansh language, he finally speaks up: "Who gave you permission to settle here? Do you have a lease agreement with the owners of this valley that you can show me?"

Mayor Lorenz looks confused, unaccustomed to being spoken to in this strange language. But he was able to understand the meaning of what the Romaner said. Lorenz answered him in Italian: "Yes, my good man, we do have the right to live here. Count Rudolf von Werdenberg-Sargans and his wife Ursula born Von Vaz even encouraged us to move here and build a settlement.

### **The Yearly Rent is Delivered**

On a mild Sunday in November and from a little church in the valley emerge a large number of people. They are the free Walsers from Safien. The last to leave the small house of God is the preacher. Mayor Brehm of Gurtnaetsch requests that the men stay on for a while longer. They all gather around their mayor, even the people from the farmsteads Camana, Grosswald, Zaloen, and Guen are here. Mayor Brehm begins:

"St. Martin's Day is coming up very fast, when we will have to deliver the tribute for our land lease. You, the foremen of each farmstead, should have received the list of rents owed. May I remind you of your obligation to assess the exact quantity of cheese, butter, and pepper that each tenant farmer is to deliver. Early on St.

Martin's morning, when we start out on our way to Cazis, I expect the foremen, along with the helpers stipulated in the contract, by the road. We don't want to waste any time."



## **The Safien Valley - Rent Day**

A Word-for-**Word** Account

*As told by W. Derichsweiler, Swiss Alpenclub yearbook 1919*

It is still dark and one only hears the babbling of the glacier brook. Now people start moving at the end of the valley **on the** Gurnaetscher farm. The day before, Hans zum Bach. the Gredings ab dem Bodmen, the children.

of Peter Bandli ab dem innern Guot, die Greta, Peter und Mathias ab den obern Huesern and Hans Bargunyer all brought Laib Kaese (whole wheels of cheese), Stoecke Butter (molds of butter) and little moneybags full of Groschen (small silver coins) to Mayor Brehm. In front. of the mayor's house stand six pack mules. Each of the mules is being loaded up by a farmhand. As the morning. begins to break. Mayor Brehm and Christen Greding as head of the farmstead take the lead. Each mule wears a round bell around his neck and their happy sounds fill the air as they head down through the sandy Rabiussabett and across to the other embankment to the Wider's farm. There Andreas zum Bach joins them with his loaded. horse. One horse alone manages to carry the rent for this farmstead, including what Bandli and Peter zum Bacch and Peter Buchli's child contribute.

They pass by the Ronghof, because the people who live there don't have to pay tribute to the convent.

Soon they arrive at the Hof zum Turm, where Bartli Zinsli and Lorenz Tester await them. They have four horses loaded with rent from Hof zum Turm and from Sandlaschg, accompanied by four farmhands.

Near Maloenia Jakob Tschoeri, with two horses and two farm- hands, join them. At the Hof zum Bach Michel Tester waits with one horse and one farmhand. All together they form a caravan of respectable people, 14 trail horses and 13 farmhands who start out into the early morning.

Descending on a steep mountain trail, you can now see the Camaner approach: Hans Tester, Heinrich Gartmann, Christian im Boden, Heiny Greding and Chris- tian Galersch with four loaded horses, each one led by a farmhand. The Camaners had already paid rent on Michaeli's Day (29 September) - two horse loads' worth. At the village square they meet up with a second cara- van. Here are Michel Gartmann with his horse from the Hof Kleinand Grosswald; Hans Juon, Christ z'Guen and Hans Cavaser of Bruschgaleschg with two horses and two farmhands, Hans Prem from Hof Galler; Jakob Juon and Joos Greding with seven horses and seven farmhands; Thomas Buchli, Hans Gampler and Christian Walter with seven horses and seven farmhands from Hof Guen; and finally Thomas Masueger and Hans Schocher with three horses and three farmhands from Hof Salpenna.

The stately caravan has grown to 26 men, 47 loaded. pack horses, and 46 farmhands. Man following man, horse to horse it ascends the steep and narrow mountain path and then descends the Heinzenberg toward Cazis, all the while accompanied by the happily ringing bells of the horses.

They approach the convent. The Abbess, "by God's grace of the worthy Church St. Peter zuo Chatz," sur- rounded by her nuns, is waiting for them in the shade of a large Linden tree. Right next to her is a very large scale. The Mayor of Safien and a sworn servant of

the Abbess. carefully weigh each rent good, check over the accounts.

and issue receipts. After the heavy work is accomplished, the Abbess offers a hearty meal and refreshing drink to all participants (ein erbere Zehrung zuo guoten Truewen); which she can well afford after taking in such good rent. It is the year 1390.

### **An Unexpected Invitation**

A merry company of mule drivers travels up the Tschappina. They are the Safiers returning home. Leading the train is Mayor Brehm. Today he is in a good mood; after all, the delivery of rents in Cazis agreed exactly with the requirements. Yes, even the Abbess gave him special praise this year. At the tail end of the caravan are Mathias, the son of Peter Bandli, and Heini Gredig. Both are still quite young. Mathias almost has to rip his horse's head off every few paces it wants to rest. The animal is old. Mathias's father bought it at market in Italy last year. These last mule drivers keep slowing down.

Heini Gredig looks around him, musing: "How gently the slopes to pastures and wayside barns climb up toward Tschappina. These could make fat meadows! Judging from the plants the soil must be fertile."

Mathias nods in agreement and says: "How two can have the very same thought at the same time! I would be willing to exchange our homestead farthest back in the Safien Valley, where fox and rabbit bid each other goodnight, for this place here."

"It will never come to that, because this region of Taschappina has mostly been cleared and leased to Heinzenberger farmers," answers Heini. They soon drop this subject. as a more pressing

problem comes up. They arrive at the Glass Pass, where the caravan waits to let

The stragglers catch up. Suddenly all eyes turn toward the south. The sound of dogs barking reaches their ears, and before long a group of hunters appear. They had probably searched for prey in the cliffs of the Beverin. The golden evening sun rests upon the descending hunters. So clear is the evening air that the mule drivers can recognize the face of one of the approaching men.

That richly clad gentleman is surely our new landlord, Freeman Ulrich von Rhaezuens," calls out Mayor Brehm. Christian Gredig agrees: "You could be right."

"Look, they got themselves a fine ibex (mountain. goat)." notices Bartli Zinsli, the hot-blooded hunter. "To-morrow I want to try my luck in catching one myself. But first I just have to go take a look at this buck."

The distinguished group catches up with the Safiers in no time, who greet their lord respectfully. Freeman Ulrich seems in good spirits this day and shows off his

prey. Soon he is engaged in serious discussion with the people under his protection. All of a sudden Baron Ulrich. changes the subject abruptly, addressing the Safiers that surround him: "I am glad our paths crossed this day. I wish to make a proposition to you. It seems that you are getting very crowded in Safien and I have a solution for you. I invite your "overflowing" Walsers to move to Glas and Tschappina."

Mathias Bandli's eyes light up: "Freeman Ulrich, are you serious about this invitation?"

"Of course I am serious, young man," the usually gruff Rhaezuenser answers in a friendly voice.

"This question is well worth discussing," Mayor Brehm interjects. Encouraged by the mayor's words, Ulrich now continues: "You men all know the region. It would be easy to build a settlement here. You would not have to deal with the heavy labor of clearing. The soil is deep here and fertile, producing the finest meadows on the Heinzenberg. Well then, who accepts my invitation?" "Hold it, sir, we Walsers don't make important decisions this hastily," answers Heinrich Gartmann. "We will want much more information, like for instance whose territory this is and who owns the land?"

The Freeman answers: "I rule over the entire Heinzenberg. All powers and rights pertaining to it belong to me. The land parcels are a different question. The majority of them are owned by the Convent of Cazis; but besides that, I and other noblemen also own pieces of land. As the territorial ruler I have the power and authority to make room for you people. It isn't for naught that I am known as Ulrich the Mighty across all of the land."

The Walsers had been listening attentively, and Thomas Masueger speaks up: "What about the peasants from Urmein and Flerden who presently make use of these farms and the Alp Luesch? Surely they own them through **an** inheritable lease agreement? How could there be a glimmer of hope for us to settle on Tschappina?"

No, that is not so!" barks the Freiherr rather rudely. "They merely lease various tenant farms in Flerden and Urmein. But for the land parcels on Tschappina they have no lease to inherit. I am certain

that neither the Convent of Cazis nor the Lords of Ehrenfels or other land owners. would have any objection to leasing to you Walsers. On the contrary, they can expect more rent from you, if they entrust you with their lands. It will not take you long to soon get better crops than the farmers from Flerden and Urmein."

"But we would have no alps here for our use!" another worries.

"This fear is also unwarranted. Can you see the big Alp Luesch which reaches from Bischoler Lake to the

Beverin? It belongs to the Convent of Cazis. The Abbess would be willing to forego half of that alp to new settlers. I know that for certain, since I recently sent a courier there to specifically inquire about that," the Freeman assured them.

"Well then, let us risk it!" shouted a few young Walsers. "Young men, not so hasty! You missed the most important point in our discussion," old Hans Brehm cautions them.

"Well, say it!" the boys add impatiently.

"What are the conditions under which the noble Freeman will allow us to take up residence in Tschappina?" "Yes, what are they? We first want to know!" the Safiers shout with one voice.

Is that a smile that appears on the Freeman's face? "You will be treated just as all the other free farmers on the Heinzenberg!" he says magnanimously.

"In that case the Freeman will have to look elsewhere. for settlers. Does his lordship really believe that we free Walsers and Safiers will forego the rights and freedoms we have enjoyed for many generations? We elect our own mayor and judge, hold our own court, pay no taxes, and more," the Safiers objected.

"Keep your blood cool!" cautions the Freeman. "We'll do it like this: On Tschappina you shall have your own court. But the mayor I shall appoint myself from your midst.

"We shall never agree to that!" the mule drivers answer, as if in one voice. "The Counts of Sargans and especially the Vazer were nobler lords than this."

The Rhaezuenser answers: "They also knew why. They desperately needed the Walsers as soldiers and to protect the mountain passes. I, on the other hand, do not need new mercenaries. Should I need you, you would of course have to assist me from Safien.

"So listen to my last and unchangeable offer concerning the mayoral elections: You give me three candidates. your community approves of. From those three I shall appoint your mayor. Final offer."

Even this form does not please the free Walsers. They struggle against it. But the Mighty one stands firm.

The mayor calls his men aside and they hold council. They cannot decide today to give up a part of their rights. which are so much a part of them.

It is getting dark. Finally Mayor Brehm walks over to the impatiently waiting Freeman and begins to talk: "Sir, today it is impossible for us to accept the conditions you set and the invitation you gave us. Within the next few

days I shall send a messenger to you with our decision."

With the words, "Fine with me!" the Rhaezuenser turns. his horse and charges away, to catch up with his hunting party.

It is the year 1390.

## **Epilogue**

I didn't know there existed such a united people in Switzerland. It always seemed to me that it was every man for himself. What made you Walsers be so concerned about each other's welfare? What kept you together as a proverbial greater family? It is so remarkable, as Switzerland is not known as a tribal society. I do hope you continue in the footsteps of your forefathers. and cherish family.

Grampa is silent. The children are not yet satisfied.

As if with one voice they ask: "Well, Grampa, did they move over in the end, the Safier?"

Grandfather has a faraway look in his eyes and then he finally continues: "Well, yes, little by little they. climbed the ladder and took possession of Glas, Masuegg, the upper community (Obergemeinde), of Bruneir, the land around the present church, the Ried, the lower community (Untergemeinde) and of Jelen.

Now, my children, you know why our forefathers did not speak the same language as the other Heinzenbergers (who spoke Romansh). And why still today our dialect. is different. And maybe now you understand why the Maiensaesse and mountain meadows of the farmers of Flerden and Urmein lean so closely into our



homeland. and why on the Beverin Ridge other communities of the Heinzen Mountain could keep their forest border so close to the Beverin. However, I have to tell you that now and then the Tschappiner still argued with their romansh neighbors over the precious land. And that soon some Walser families packed up and moved to Urmein, yes even as far as Thusis. The Walsers were so fruitful and multiplied so readily, that it continuously became necessary for them to expand their settlements. For far too long our German-speaking forefathers on the Heinzenberg were considered and treated as enemies and intruders. But today it is peaceful.

Surely it happened in about the same way in other valleys: for example in the Praettigau, in the Schanfigg as well as Vals and Avers; wherever the Romansh and the Walsers met head to head. Slowly but surely the borders between the two tribes erased themselves. Today both romansh and walserish blood flow in the veins of most Graubuendner people. The Walsers and the Romansh created through mutual collaboration something that their children can be proud of, and that is a state in which the people enjoy free speech and vote for their rights.

There is another battle in which our forefathers fought. namely in the struggle for increased religious freedom.

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"Tschappina belonged to the parish of Portein. Our Walsers there went to mass in the Gallus Church. But they were not happy about that arrangement, because it was at quite a distance from their village. And besides, the sermons were delivered in romansh. They tried hard to separate themselves from Portein. In the year 1509 they achieved independence for their St. Theodor's Church. From then

on the Tschappiner had their own parish priest who was allowed to independently preach, baptize, and conduct funerals. For a time, however, the Tschappiners were still obliged to go to mass in Portein for the feasts of Pentecost and Corpus Christi, and Ascension-of-Maria (15 August), as well as pay half of their usual tithes to the Gallus Church.

"Our forefathers also paid their share toward the maintenance of the vestry at St. Leonhard's Church in Flerden, because they had to attend mass there every third Sunday of each month; that is until they gained their independent Church in Tschappina. In the year 1523 the Tschappiner bought themselves free from that obligation as well by paying thirteen rheinisch Gulden.

"Now, my dear children, you know the story of the wandering Walsers and you know how they fought hard for their political and spiritual freedom, and how they put themselves out for those rights." With these words, Grampa ends his story. Islands in the Sky.

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